Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

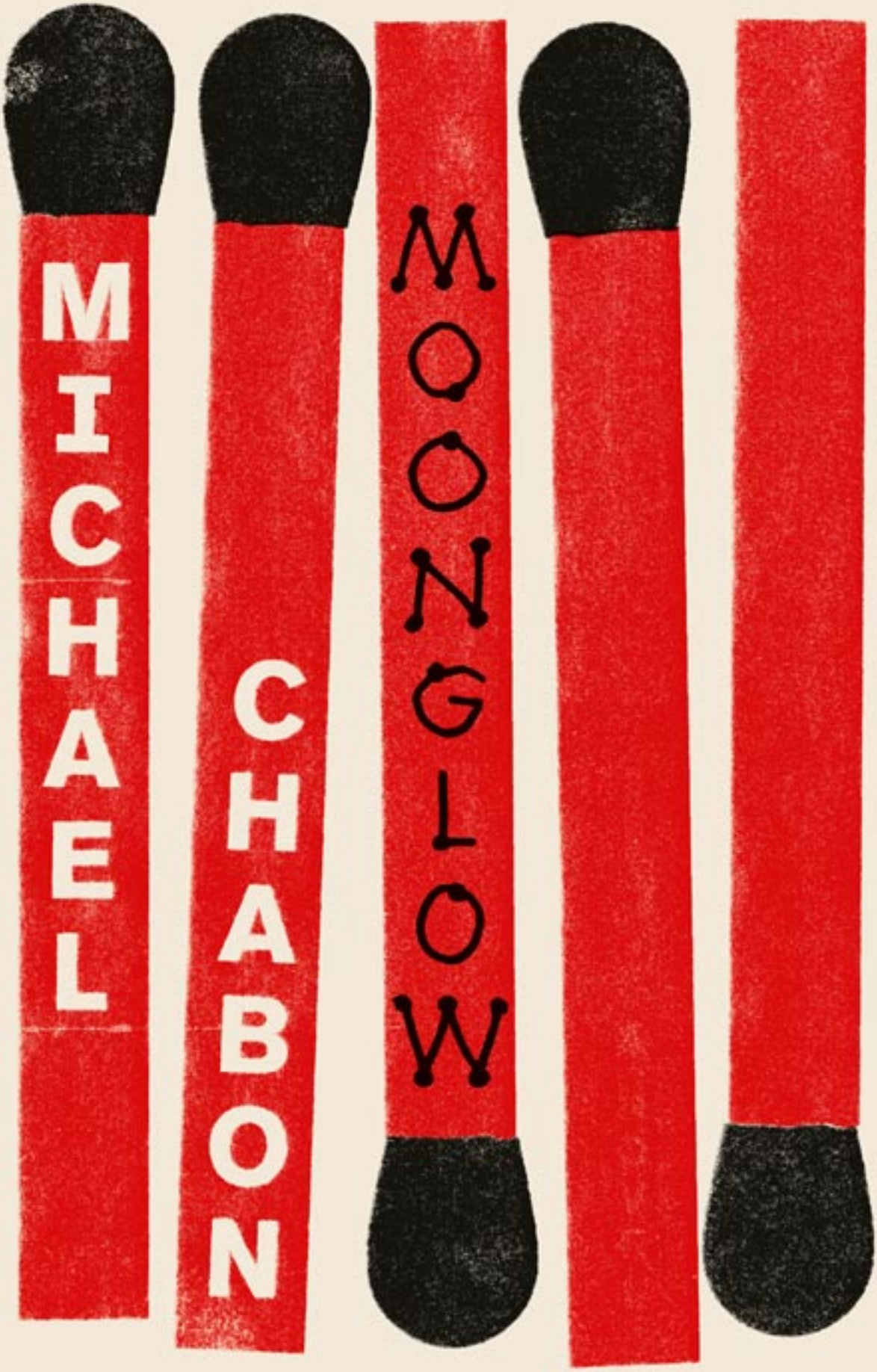
Moonglow

Written by Michael Chabon

Published by Fourth Estate

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.


MICHAEL CHABON
MOONGLOW

Moonglow

Michael Chabon

4th ESTATE • *London*

4th Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.4thEstate.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by 4th Estate in 2016
First published in the United States by Harper, an imprint of
HarperCollins*Publishers*, in 2016

1

Copyright © Michael Chabon 2016

Illustrations by Adalis Martinez
Endpaper artwork (hardback only): Sergio34/Shutterstock, Inc.

Michael Chabon asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-0-00-754891-0
Trade paperback ISBN 978-0-00-818980-8

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Scout's honor.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Designed by Leah Carlson-Stanisic

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

MOONGLOW

There is no dark side of the moon, really. Matter of fact, it's all dark.

—WERNHER VON BRAUN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In preparing this memoir, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with memory, narrative purpose, or the truth as I prefer to understand it. Wherever liberties have been taken with names, dates, places, events, and conversations, or with the identities, motivations, and interrelationships of family members and historical personages, the reader is assured that they have been taken with due abandon.

NOW! THE MISSILE YOU CAN FLY!

AN EXACT 1/20th SCALE MODEL OF U. S. NAVY'S

Aerobee-Hi research rocket

Aerobee-Hi

NRL-41

Entire Missile Returns Safely by Parachute

- 4 years to develop, $50,000 production tooling
- Missile and rocket motor tested at U.S. White Sands Proving Grounds
- Rocket motor (pound of thrust every 2 seconds) classified safe "propellant device" by I.C.C.
- Rises 1,000 feet at 150 mph, ejects parachute for safe return
- Applauded by scientists & engineers as the answer to safe model rocketry
- Cape Canaveral in miniature — Educational, reliable, unique

15,000 man hours of engineering research went into development of this incredible 1/20th scale model of the U. S. Navy's Aerobee-Hi missile which will zoom up 1,000 feet (at 150-200 mph), eject a parachute from its soft vinyl nose cone, lower itself safely to earth. It takes 5 minutes to repack chute, install a new motor, and missile is ready for flight again. Solid fuel rocket motor—classified safe by I.C.C.—was introduced with missile in a feature article in Mechanix Illustrated Magazine. Easily assembled, kit contains all necessary materials, includes 6 rocket motors and single rail launcher for $9.95 ppd. Scaled, 42" high all-steel launching tower—adjustable over 10° arc for wind correction—in complete kit, $9.95 ppd. Additional motors—6 for $2.95 ppd. *Money back guarantee.*

C/S CHABON SCIENTIFIC CO.

1308B LINCOLN BUILDING, 60 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK 17

ESQUIRE : *December* 353

Advertisement, Esquire, *October 1958*

1

This is how I heard the story. When Alger Hiss got out of prison, he had a hard time finding a job. He was a graduate of Harvard Law School, had clerked for Oliver Wendell Holmes and helped charter the United Nations, yet he was also a convicted perjurer and notorious as a tool of international communism. He had published a memoir, but it was dull stuff and no one wanted to read it. His wife had left him. He was broke and hopeless. In the end one of his remaining friends took pity on the bastard and pulled a string. Hiss was hired by a New York firm that manufactured and sold a kind of fancy barrette made from loops of piano wire. Feathercombs, Inc., had gotten off to a good start but had come under attack from a bigger competitor that copied its designs, infringed on its trademarks, and undercut its pricing. Sales had dwindled. Payroll was tight. In order to make room for Hiss, somebody had to be let go.

In an account of my grandfather's arrest, in the *Daily News* for May 25, 1957, he is described by an unnamed coworker as "the quiet type." To his fellow salesmen at Feathercombs, he was a homburg on the coat rack in the corner. He was the hardest-working but least effective member of the Feathercombs sales force. On his lunch breaks he holed up with a sandwich and the latest issue of *Sky and Telescope* or *Aviation Week*. It was known that he drove a Crosley, had a foreign-born wife and a teenage daughter and lived with them somewhere in deepest Bergen County. Before the day of his arrest, my grandfather had distinguished himself to his coworkers only twice. During Game 5 of the 1956 World Series, when the office radio failed, my

grandfather had repaired it with a vacuum tube prized from the interior of the telephone switchboard. And a Feathercombs copywriter reported once bumping into my grandfather at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, where the foreign wife was, of all things, starring as Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*. Beyond this nobody knew much about my grandfather, and that seemed to be the way he preferred it. People had long since given up trying to engage him in conversation. He had been known to smile but not to laugh. If he held political opinions—if he held opinions of any kind—they remained a mystery around the offices of Feathercombs, Inc. It was felt he could be fired without damage to morale.

Shortly after nine o'clock on the morning of the twenty-fourth, the president of Feathercombs heard a disturbance outside his office, where a quick-witted girl had been positioned to filter out creditors and tax inspectors. A male voice spoke with urgency that scaled rapidly to anger. The intercom on the president's desk buzzed and buzzed again. He heard a chime of glass breaking. It sounded like a telephone when you slammed down the receiver. Before the president could rise from his chair to see what the matter was, my grandfather muscled into the room. He brandished a black handset (in those days a blunt instrument) that trailed three feet of frayed cord.

Back in the late 1930s, when he wasn't hustling pool, my grandfather had put himself through four years at Drexel Tech by delivering pianos for Wanamaker's department store. His shoulders spanned the doorway. His kinky hair, escaped from its daily paste-down of Brylcreem, wobbled atop his head. His face was so flushed with blood that he looked sunburned. "I never saw anyone so angry," an eyewitness told the *News*. "You could almost smell smoke coming off him."

For his part, the president of Feathercombs was astonished to discover that he had approved the firing of a maniac. "What's this about?" he said.

It was a pointless question, and my grandfather disdained to

answer it; he was opposed to stating the obvious. Most of the questions people asked you, he felt, were there to fill up dead space, curtail your movements, divert your energy and attention. Anyway, my grandfather and his emotions were never really on speaking terms. He took hold of the frayed end of the telephone cord. He wound it twice around his left hand.

The president tried to stand up, but his legs got tangled in the kneehole of his desk. His chair shot out from under him and toppled over, casters rattling. He screamed. It was a fruity sound, halfway to a yodel. As my grandfather fell on top of him, the president twisted himself toward the window overlooking East Fifty-seventh Street. He just had time to notice that passersby seemed to be crowding together on the sidewalk below.

My grandfather looped the cord of the handset around the president's throat. He had maybe two minutes before the rocket of his anger burned up its fuel and fell back to earth. That would be ample time. During World War II, he had been trained in the use of a garrote.* He knew that, done properly, strangulation was short work.

"Oh my God," said the secretary, Miss Mangel, making a late appearance on the scene.

She had reacted quickly when my grandfather burst into her office smelling, she would recall afterward, like wood smoke. She had managed to buzz twice before my grandfather grabbed the handset away from her. He picked up the intercom. He yanked the handset cord from the base.

"You'll have to pay for that," Miss Mangel said.

When he told this story thirty-two years later, my grandfather put a checkmark of admiration beside Miss Mangel's name, but with his rocket only halfway up the slope of its parabola he took her words as provocation. He threw the base of the intercom out the window of

---

* A length of piano wire, of all things, typically concealed inside a shoe- or bootlace.

Miss Mangel's office. The chiming noted by the president was the sound of the intercom sailing through a spiderweb of glass into the street.

Hearing a cry of outrage from below, Miss Mangel went to the window to look. Down on the sidewalk a man in a gray suit was sitting looking up at her. There was blood on the left lens of his round spectacles. He was laughing.* People stopped to help him. The doorman announced that he was going to call the police. That was when Miss Mangel heard her boss screaming. She turned from the window to run into his office.

At first glance the office appeared to be empty. Then she heard the tap of a shoe against a linoleum floor, a tap, another tap. The back of my grandfather's head rose from behind the desk, then sank again. Brave Miss Mangel went around the desk. Her boss lay sprawled on his belly on the polished floor. My grandfather straddled his back, hunched forward, applying the impromptu garrote. The president bucked, and thrashed, and tried to roll himself over. The only sound was the toes of his cordovan bucks trying to get purchase against the linoleum.

Miss Mangel snatched up a letter opener from the president's desk and jabbed it into my grandfather's left shoulder. In my grandfather's reckoning, many years later, this action merited another checkmark.

The point of the letter opener sank only half an inch or so into meat, but the bite of metal blocked some meridian in the flow of my grandfather's rage. He grunted. "It was like I woke up," he said when he told me this part of the story for the first time, during the last week of his life. He unwound the cord from the president's neck.

---

* My grandfather knew only that the man he had accidentally beaned—fortunately, the intercom had only grazed his skull—declined to press charges. The *Daily News* identifies his victim as Jiří Nosek, head of the Czechoslovakian delegation to the august body that Alger Hiss had helped to charter. "This is the first time the high-ranking Red has been hit by a flying telephone," the *News* reported with a straight face, adding, "Nosek said that as a good Czech he was obliged to laugh off anything that didn't kill him."

He peeled it from the grooves it had cut into the flesh of his own left hand. The handset clattered against the floor. With a foot on either side of the president, he stood up and took a step away. The president flopped onto his back and raised himself into a sitting position, then sledded backward on his ass into a notch between two filing cabinets. He sobbed for air. When his face had hit the floor, he'd bitten his lower lip, and now his teeth were dyed pink.

My grandfather turned to face Miss Mangel. He plucked out the letter opener and laid it on the president's desk. When one of his rages wore off, you could see regret flooding his eyes like seawater. He dropped his hands to his sides.

"Forgive me," he said to Miss Mangel and to the president. I suppose he was also saying it to my mother, fourteen at the time, and to my grandmother, though arguably she was as much to blame as my grandfather. There was scant hope of forgiveness, but my grandfather did not sound as if he expected, or even wanted, to find any.

◑ ◑ ◑

At the end of my grandfather's life, his doctor prescribed a powerful hydromorphone against the pain of bone cancer. A lot of Germans were busy knocking holes in the Berlin Wall around that time, and I showed up to say goodbye to my grandfather just as Dilaudid was bringing its soft hammer to bear on his habit of silence: Out flowed a record of his misadventures, his ambiguous luck, his feats and failures of timing and nerve. He had been installed in my mother's guest bedroom for almost two weeks, and by the time I arrived in Oakland he was getting nearly twenty milligrams a day. He started talking almost the minute I sat down in the chair by his bed. It was as if he had been waiting for my company, but I believe now that he simply knew he was running out of time.

The recollections emerged in no discernible order apart from the first, which was also the earliest.

"Did I tell you," he said, lolling on his palliative cloud, "about the time I dropped a kitten out of the window?"

I did not say, then or at any point until he sank into the cloud for good, that he had told me very little about his life. I had yet to hear about the attack on the president of Feathercombs, Inc., so I could not point out to him that I sensed a motif of defenestration beginning to emerge in his autobiography. Later, when he did tell me about Miss Mangel, the intercom, and the Czech diplomat, I would choose to skip the smart remark.

"Did it die?" I asked him.

I was eating a cup of his raspberry Jell-O. Nothing else tempted his palate apart from a spoonful or two of the chicken soup my mother cooked for him, following the recipe of my late grandmother—born and raised in France—which called for a squeeze of lemon to brighten the broth. Even the Jell-O was not of much interest to him. There was plenty to spare.

"It was a third-story window," my grandfather said. He added, as if his native city were known for its adamantine sidewalks, "in *Philadelphia*."

"How old were you?"

"Three or four."

"Jesus. Why would you do something like that?"

He poked out his tongue, once, twice. That was something he did every few minutes. It often looked as if he were passing clownish judgment on something you had told him, but it was really only a side effect of the meds. His tongue was pale and had the nap of suede. I knew from a few precious demonstrations during my childhood that he could touch the tip of it to the tip of his nose. Outside the window of my mother's guest bedroom, the East Bay sky was gray as the nimbus of hair around his suntanned face.

"Curiosity," my grandfather decided, and stuck out his tongue.

I said that I had heard curiosity could be harmful, in particular to cats.

As a boy, my grandfather lived with his parents, his father's father, and his kid brother, Reynard—my mother's Uncle Ray—in three rooms at the corner of Tenth and Shunk in South Philadelphia.

His father, a German-speaking native of Pressburg (now Bratislava), had failed in a series of dry goods stores and corner groceries throughout the 1920s and '30s. After that he abandoned hope of enduring ownership and played out the string as a sales clerk in liquor stores, watching other men's cash registers get robbed. In my grandfather's recollections his mother appeared as a strong back and a heart of gold, a "saint" indentured to the service of her husband and sons. In photographs she is a boxy woman, girdled with steel, shod in coal-black stompers, her bosom so large it might have housed turbines. She was all but illiterate in Yiddish and English but obliged my grandfather, and later Uncle Ray, to read to her daily from the Yiddish press so that she could keep abreast of the latest calamities to beset Jewry. From every week's household budget she managed to siphon off a dollar or two for the *pushke* can. Orphans of pogrom were fed, refugees berthed on steamships to freedom. Entire hillsides in Palestine bore the oranges of her compassionate embezzlement. "In the winter the laundry froze stiff on the clothesline," my grandfather recalled. "She had to carry it up all those stairs." Uncle Ray I knew as a playboy of the late 1960s in a sky-blue turtleneck and a gray tweed blazer. He drove an Alfa Spider and wore a raffish eyepatch over his gnarly left eye. Sometimes when I looked at him I thought of Hugh Hefner and sometimes of Moshe Dayan. As a boy, however, Reynard was studious and frail.

It was my grandfather, in the early days, who ran wild. Throwing a kitten out of a window was only a warning shot.

He wandered in the summertime from breakfast to dark, ranging as far east as the rancid Delaware and as far south as the Navy Yard. He saw an evicted family drinking tea on the sidewalk amid their beds, their lamps, their Victrola, a parakeet in a brass cage. He unfolded a packet of newspaper on the lid of an ashcan and found the eyeball of a cow. He saw children and animals beaten savagely and yet with patience and care. He saw a convertible Nash mobbed outside an AME church; Marian Anderson stepped out of it and lit up his memory, six decades afterward, with the crescent moon of her smile.

South Philadelphia was broadcast with Moonblatts and Newmans, those cousins who one day would people the weddings and funerals of my mother's and my childhoods. Their homes served as my grandfather's way stations. In threading his routes from one to the next, past blocks controlled by Irish and Italians, my grandfather laid the foundation of his wartime work. He cultivated secret contacts among the Italian bakers and grocers, running errands or working a broom in exchange for payment in pennies, lemon ice, or a twist of warm bread. He studied the nuances of people's ways of speaking and carrying themselves. If you hoped to avoid a beating on Christian Street, you could alter your gait and the cant of your head to look as though you were walking where you belonged. When that failed—or if, like my grandfather, you were not averse to scrapping—you fought dirty. Even Christian Street bravos squealed like babies if you hooked your thumbs in their eye sockets. Every so often, on the slope of a train embankment, behind the breast-shaped silos of the fertilizer plant, a battle would be pitched with bed slats, lengths of pipe, slingshots, and rocks. My grandfather lost a tooth, broke an arm, took uncountable stitches. On his left buttock he bore a pouty scar, the work of a beer bottle he sat on during a fight in a vacant lot behind the McCahan sugar refinery. Sixty years later the

scar was visible whenever he used the bedpan, a silvery pucker, the kiss of violence.

His absences and injuries caused consternation to his parents, who made efforts to curtail them. Bounds were set, borders established; my grandfather subverted them. Resolute in his refusal to give details or name names, resistant to corporal punishment, willing to forgo whatever treat he was to be deprived of, he wore his parents down. In time they surrendered.

"Nothing can be done about a boy who throws cats out of windows," said old Abraham, my grandfather's grandfather, in his Pressburger German. Abraham ruled from his corner of the parlor that doubled as a dining room, enthroned atop his hemorrhoid donut among his books of commentary. It was nearly dark, one of the last free evenings of the summer.

"But what if he's lost?" my grandmother said for the thousandth or millionth time.

"He isn't lost," Uncle Ray said, issuing the finding that ultimately prevailed in the family Talmud. "He knows where he is."

He was trapped under a train car, one of six wooden boxcars on a stub at the far end of a storage yard by the river. The boxcars were used last to rush Baldwin-Felts men to the Paint Creek Mine War. Now they stood pastured against a hump of ground, and the mouths of a trumpet creeper devoured them.

He was hiding from a railroad bull, a big man named Creasey with a film on his left eye and patches of carroty hair growing on parts of his face where no hair ought to be. Creasey had already thrashed my grandfather soundly a number of times that summer. The first time he jerked my grandfather's arm up behind his back so hard the bones sang. The second time he dragged my grandfather by an earlobe across the yard to the main gate, where he applied his boot heel to the seat of my grandfather's trousers; my grandfather claimed the earlobe still bore the print of Creasey's thumb. The third time Creasey caught my grandfather trespassing, he strapped him

thoroughly with the leather harness of his Pennsy uniform. This time my grandfather planned to stay under that boxcar until Creasey moved on or dropped dead.

Creasey stuck around, smoking cigarettes, pacing the weeds between the stub of track and the rest of the storage yard. My grandfather, flat on his belly, watched the bull's dusty boots through a scrim of dandelion and foxtail. Scrape, stop, pivot, return. Every few minutes a cigarette fell with a pat against the gravel and met its end beneath Creasey's right boot. My grandfather heard the twist of a bottle cap, a slosh of liquid, a belch. He had the impression that Creasey was waiting for somebody, killing time, maybe getting up his nerve.

My grandfather puzzled over it. Creasey was supposed to keep moving, sweeping the lots for hoboes, tramps, and pilferers like my grandfather, who had come to the Greenwich Yard that summer drawn by reports of coal for the taking, spillover from the cars as they trundled to the piers. The first time Creasey caught him it was because my grandfather had been weighed down by twenty-five pounds of coal in a sugar sack. Why did the man not carry on now with the work the Pennsylvania Railroad paid him to do? Inside the boxcar, over his head, my grandfather heard small animals in their nests, rousing themselves to their nightly business. According to his mother's natural history, he knew, that business was to bite young boys and give them rabies.

At last Creasey trampled his fifth cigarette, took another swig, and moved off. My grandfather counted to thirty and then slid out from under the boxcar. He brushed the grit from his belly, where the skin prickled. He spotted Creasey carrying a knapsack, making for one of the little stucco houses scattered here and there across the lots. On his first forays into the Greenwich Yard my grandfather had been charmed by the idea that railmen were cottaged like shepherds among the herded trains. He soon determined that the bungalows were no one's habitations. They had mesh grilles over their black-washed windows, and if you put your ear to their doors you could

hear a thrum of power and sometimes a thunk like the clockwork of a bank vault. Until now my grandfather had never seen anybody going into one or coming out.

Creasey fished a key ring from his hip and let himself in. The door closed softly behind him.

My grandfather knew that he ought to head for home, where a hot supper and an operetta of reproach awaited him. He was hungry, and practiced in deafness and the formulation of remorse. But he had come here today to stand one final time at the top of one particular signal bridge that he had come to think of as his own, and tell another summer goodbye.

He cut across the storage yard and stole along a stretch of railbed to "his" signal bridge. He scaled the service ladder and clambered out along the catwalk to its midpoint, fifteen feet above the tracks. He raised up, holding onto the body of the central signal lantern. He jammed his feet in their canvas sneakers into the steel lattice of the catwalk. He let go of the signal lantern and stood balanced with arms outspread, hooked only by his ankles to the turning earth. Between him and the tenement on Shunk Street, the rail yard shuffled and sorted its rolling stock bound for New York, Pittsburgh, St. Louis. Trains and sections of trains clanged and rumbled and plowed furrows in the gloom.

He turned his face to the east. Darkness piled up like a thunderhead over New Jersey. Beyond the river lay Camden, beyond Camden the Jersey Shore, beyond the shore the Atlantic Ocean, and beyond that, Paris, France. His mother's brother, a veteran of the Argonne, had informed my grandfather that in the "cathouses" of that city a man might cross one further border, where silk stocking met white thigh. My grandfather took the signal lantern in his arms. He pressed his hips against its smooth encasement and looked up at the evening sky. A full moon rose, tinted by its angle on earth's atmosphere to a color like the flesh of a peach. My grandfather had spent most of that last Friday of the summer reading

a copy of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science,* found among some other unsold magazines in the back room of his father's store. The last story was about a daring earthman who flew in an atomic rocket to the Moon's dark side, where he found ample air and water, fought bloodthirsty selenites, and fell in love with a pale and willing lunar princess. The Moon was a tough neighborhood, and the princess required frequent salvation by the earthman.

My grandfather regarded the Moon. He thought about the noble girl in the story with her *"graceful, undulating body"* and felt the swell of an inner tide reaching toward her, lifting him like Enoch in the whirlwind into the sky. He ascended the skyward tide of his longing. He would be there for her. He was coming to her rescue.

A door banged shut, and Creasey came out of the little house and rejoined his evening route. He was no longer carrying the knapsack. He crossed a set of tracks, a hitch of stiffness in his walk, and vanished among the cars.

My grandfather climbed down from the signal bridge. His path home did not run past the little house. But old Abraham had ruled correctly from his corner of the parlor: Nothing could be done for a boy who would throw a kitten out of a window onto a Philadelphia pavement just to see what would happen if he did.

My grandfather approached the little house with its gridded black windows. For a full minute he stood and watched it. He put his ear to the door. Over the electrical hum, he heard a human sound: choking, or laughter, or sobs.

He knocked. The sound broke off. The house's mysterious clockwork clicked. From the marshaling yard came the trumpeting of lashed-up engines, ready to drag a long load west. He knocked again.

"Who's there?"

My grandfather gave his first and last name. On reflection he appended his address. There followed a prolonged spell of unmistakable coughing from the other side of the door. When it passed, he heard a stirring, the creak of a bed or chair.

A girl peered out, hiding the right half of her face behind the door that she gripped with both hands, looking ready to slam it shut. The visible half of her head was a mat of peroxide tangles. Around the left eye, under a delicate eyebrow, paint mingled with mascara in cakes and blotches. She wore the fingernails on her left hand long, lacquered in black cherry. The nails on her right hand were bitten and bare of paint. She was wrapped loosely in a man's tartan bathrobe. If she was surprised to see him, she did not show it. If she had been crying, she was not crying anymore. But my grandfather understood Creasey the way you come to understand a man who repeatedly kicks your ass. The details of the hurt that Creasey might have done to this girl during his visit remained obscure, but my grandfather felt the outrage all the more vividly for his ignorance. He saw it in the ruin of her eye paint. He smelled it, a taint of Javela water and armpit in the air that leaked from behind the half-open door.

"Well?" she said. "State your business, Shunk Street."

"I saw him come in there," my grandfather said. "That Creasey bastard."

It was a word not to be used in the hearing of adults, especially women, but in this instance it felt fitting. The girl's face came out from behind the door like the moon from behind a factory wall. She took a better look at him.

"He is a bastard," she said. "You're right about that."

He saw that the hair on the right side of her part was cropped as short as his own, as though to rid that half of lice. On the right side of her upper lip she had raised enough whisker to form the handlebar of a mustache. Her right eye was free of paint, under a dense black brow. Apart from a shadow of stubble universal on either side of the chin, an invisible rule appeared to have apportioned evenly the male and female of her nature. My grandfather had heard but disbelieved neighborhood reports of sideshow hermaphrodites, cat girls, ape girls, four-legged women who must be mounted like tables. He might have reconsidered his doubt if not for the fact that he saw,

filling both sides of the loose flannel wrapper from the neck down, only womanly curvature and shadow.

"The price of a peep is one nickel, Shunk Street," she said. "I believe you may owe me a dime."

My grandfather looked down at his shoes. They were not much to look at. "Come on," he said, reaching for her arm. Even through the flannel of her sleeve, he could feel fever on her skin.

She shook loose of his grip with a jerk of her arm.

"He won't come back this way for a while. But we have to go now," my grandfather said. There were whiskers on the chins of his own aunts: big deal. He was here by the power of a wish on an evening star. "Come on!"

"Aren't you funny," she said. She peeked out of the doorway, looked to either side. She lowered her voice in a show of co-conspiracy. "Trying to rescue me."

From her lips it sounded like the most peabrained idea ever conceived. She left the door hanging open and went back inside. She sat down on a cot and pulled a stiff blanket around her. In the light of a candle guttering on an overturned jar lid, panels of black switches and gauges glinted. Creasey's knapsack lay neglected on the floor.

"Are you going to take me home to your mama and papa?" she suggested in a voice that made him momentarily dislike her. "A drug-sick whore full of TB?"

"I can take you to a hospital."

"Aren't you funny," she said, more tenderly this time. "You already know I can unlock the door from the inside, honey. I'm not a prisoner here."

My grandfather felt there was more to her imprisonment than a lock and key, but he did not know how to put that feeling into words. She reached into the knapsack and pulled out a package of Old Golds. Something about the pomp with which she set fire to her cigarette made her seem younger than he had thought.

"Your pal Creasey already rescued me," she said. "He could have

left me lying there right where he found me, half dead with my face in a pile of cinders. Right where those Ealing boys red-lighted me."

She told him that from the age of eleven she had been traveling in the sideshow of the Entwhistle–Ealing Bros. Circus, out of Peru, Indiana. She had been born a girl, in Ocala, Florida, but at puberty, nature had refashioned her with a mustache and chin fuzz.

"I went over big for quite a little while, but lately, I'm getting all this action from my girl department." She folded her arms under her breasts. "Body's been goofing with me all my life."

My grandfather wanted to say that he felt the same way about his brain, that organ whose flights of preposterous idealism were matched only by its reveries of unfettered violence. But he thought it would be wrong to compare his troubles to hers.

"I guess that's the reason I started on the junk," she said. "A hermaphrodite was something. It has a little poetry. There is just no poetry in a bearded lady."

She had been nodding, she said, dead to the world, when management at last saw fit to throw her off the circus train as it pulled out of the yard, bound for Altoona.

"Creasey found my valise where those assholes had pitched it. Conveyed me to these comfortable lodgings." She adjusted her legs and, before she gathered the blanket more tightly, caught my grandfather trying to see into the shadow between them. "Creasey is a bastard, true. But he brings me food, and smokes, and magazines. And candles to read by. The only thing he won't bring me is a fix. Pretty soon it'll be all the same to me, anyway. Meantime he doesn't charge me more rent than I'm willing to pay."

My grandfather contemplated the ashes of his plan. He felt she was telling him she was going to die, and that she planned on doing it here, in this room that jumped in the candlelight. Her chest blood was all over a crumpled chamois rag, and on the woolen blanket, and on the lapels of the robe.

"Creasey has his points," she said. "And I'm sure the folks on

Shunk Street would be happy to know that he has been kind enough to leave me in possession of my virginity. In the technical sense." She squirmed against the cot illustratively. "Railroad men. They are practical fellows. Always find a way around."

That started her barking into her scrap of chamois, which bloodied it some more. The violence of her coughing shook the blanket loose, baring her legs to my grandfather's inspection. My grandfather felt very sorry for her, but he could not keep his gaze away from the inner darkness of her robe. The spasm passed. She folded the bloodstained part of the chamois into the remnant that was still clean.

"Have a look, Shunk Street," she said. She hoisted the hem of the tartan robe, opened her legs, and spread them wide. The pale band of belly, the shock of dark fur, the pink of her labia would endure in his memory, flying like a flag, until he died. "On the house."

He could feel the turmoil in his cheeks, throat, rib cage, loins. He could see that she saw it and was enjoying it. She closed her eyes and raised her hips a little higher. "Go ahead, sweetheart. Touch it if you want to."

My grandfather found that his lips and tongue could not form a reply. He went over and put his hand against the patch of hair between her legs. He held it there, sampling it with rigid fingers like he was taking a temperature or pulse. The night, the summer, all time and history came to a halt.

Her eyes snapped open. She lurched forward and shoved him aside, covering her mouth with the bare hand while the painted one groped for the chamois. My grandfather took a crisp white handkerchief from the back pocket of his cutoff corduroys. He presented her with this evidence of the hopefulness invested in him by his mother, every morning afresh, when she sent him out into the world. The girl crushed the handkerchief in her fist without seeming to notice it was there. My grandfather watched her body tear itself apart from the inside for what felt like a long time. He worried she might be about to die right then, in front of him. Presently, she sighed and fell backward against the cot.

Her forehead shone in the light from her stub of candle. She breathed with caution. Her eyes were half open and fixed on my grandfather, but minutes went by before she took notice of him again.

"Go home," she said.

He eased the day's inviolate handkerchief from her fist. Like a road map he unfolded it and laid it against her brow. He sealed up the flaps of her robe around her and dragged the awful blanket up to her chin with its babyish dimple. Then he went to the door, where he stopped, looking back at her. The heat of her clung like an odor to his fingertips.

"Come back sometime, Shunk Street," she said. "Maybe I'll let you rescue me yet."

When my grandfather finally made it home well after dark, there was a patrolman in the kitchen. My grandfather confessed to nothing and provided no information. My great-grandfather, egged on by the patrolman, gave my grandfather a slap across the face to see how he liked it. My grandfather said he liked it fine. He felt he had earned a measure of pain through his failure to rescue the girl. He considered informing the patrolman about her, but she was by her own admission a drug fiend and a whore, and he would rather die than rat her out. Whichever course he chose, he felt, he would betray her. So he answered to his nature and said nothing.

The patrolman returned to his beat. My grandfather was subjected to lectures, threats, accusations. He bore up under them with his usual stoicism, was sent to bed hungry, and kept the secret of the two-sided girl in the train yard for the next sixty years. The following day he was put to work in the store, working before and after school on weekdays and all day Sunday. He was not able to make it back to Greenwich Yard until late the following Saturday afternoon, after shul. It was getting dark, and the weather had turned wet the night before. Along the tracks the reflected sky lay pooled between the wooden ties like pans of quicksilver. He knocked on the door of the little house until his hand rang with the pain of knocking.